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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION REPORT - ETA Cease-Fire

Iraq

PARIS - Friday, March 24, 2006

(A) SUBJECTS COVERED IN TODAY'S REPORT:

ETA Cease-Fire

Iraq

B) SUMMARY OF COVERAGE:

From crisis to dialogue seems to be the message sent by today's headlines in their appraisal of the confrontation between PM Villepin and the opponents to his youth employment legislation, the CPE. Union leaders will be meeting with Villepin, which leads Liberation to headline "Forced Dialogue" adding: "Important demonstrations force Villepin to meet with unions." Le Figaro's article is entitled: "Villepin and Unions Begin to Talk While Demonstrations Get Out of Hand." Indeed pictures of burning cars are featured on most front pages and led last evening's news broadcasts. For Le Parisien, there is no doubt: "This CPE Is Dead . But the Ransacking Continues." Le Parisien carries a poll showing that 66% of the French are in favor of withdrawing the CPE, 35% among right-leaning sympathizers and 85% among left-leaning sympathizers. Many commentators bemoan the lost time over a dialogue which, for Liberation, is bringing together two "reluctant" interlocutors: "Villepin spurned by signs that his majority is beginning to show signs of fatigue, and the unions who realize that the situation in the streets is getting out of hand."

The ETA cease-fire leads Le Monde and Le Figaro to comment on the "first signs of hope." Both invite France to "help Zapatero" and "side with Spain." (See Part C) Catholic La Croix interviews Joseba Arregi, a former minister from the Spanish Basque region: "This cease-fire is the result of a joint judicial and police Franco-Spanish cooperation. France's contribution has been vital. Now France's help will be even more important to keep small cells which disagree with the movement from creating autonomous groups."

The Israeli election campaign, the EU Energy Summit, Belarus, the liberation of three hostages held in Iraq and the Washington Post story about a Minister of Saddam Hussein having worked for France and the CIA, make up today's international stories. Le Monde entitles one of its reports on the Iraqi Minister: "Skepticism in Paris But the Cooperation Confirmed" notes the "ambivalence in the French attitude that along with Germany led the opposition to the war in Iraq. But this is forgetting the context of the time." An unnamed source at the French Defense Ministry is quoted: "Up until the departure of Hans Blix's team from Iraq, cooperation between Paris and Washington was complete." The article goes on: "NBC's revelations will probably not have the same impact in France as in Germany where public opinion discovered in the past few months that their government's manifest opposition to the war had not prevented it from cooperating with American intelligence services backstage."

Le Monde reports on a U.S. study by two Harvard scholars who claim that "the U.S. is experiencing acts of terrorism in part because of the strong pro-Israeli lobbies in Washington." A separate article relates the Israeli press's "concern" over the study, which it interprets as "a warning signal."

At the EU Summit France's "economic patriotism" served to set the tone, according to Le Figaro, which comments on Angela Merkel's criticism of France's economic stance. All outlets report on President Chirac walking out of the conference center to protest a speech given in English, the "language of business", according to Ernest-Antoine Selliere, the "culprit." Selliere was previously President of the French Association of Business Captains, MEDEF, and has now a similar role at the European level.

(C) SUPPORTING TEXT/BLOCK QUOTES:

ETA Cease-Fire

"Basque Hope"

Left-of-center Le Monde in its editorial (03/24): "Caution is the word. While the cease-fire is what PM Zapatero was waiting

for, he refrained from sounding triumphant. He also cautioned that the peace process would be 'long, hard and difficult.' This 'permanent cease-fire' looks much more promising than the previous 'indefinite truces.' While the idea of a 'Great Basque Nation' does not fit with either the Spanish or French national approaches, Zapatero has initiated a reform that will grant the region more autonomy. He will need the political support of the French authorities, who cooperated closely these past years in policing the borders. If Zapatero manages to bring his plans to fruition he will have proved one can reconcile standing firm in the face of violence with political dialogue. Without the former, the war against terrorism is condemned to fail. Without the latter, eradicating terrorism remains a chimera. This lesson goes for more than just Spain. This is why Zapatero must be able to count on France's support."

"Hope for Peace for Basque Country"

Pierre Roussel in right-of-center Le Figaro (03/24): "Let us hope that this 'permanent cease-fire' is the beginning of the end for ETA. Spain deserves to be rid of this terrorist weight it has been carrying for the last thirty years. Zapatero is right to be cautious when he says he expects a 'long, hard and difficult' peace process. because the terrorists have renounced none of their goals. But despite this, the hopes are on a par with past hardships. The question remains whether the terrorists will be willing to renounce some of their demands in order to be part of the democratic process. France was explicitly mentioned in their communique as being part of the solution to the Basque situation. France will contribute to a definitive peace in the Basque region only if, when it comes to repression on this side of the Pyrenees, it keeps all of Spain's well-defined interests clearly in mind."

Iraq

"Iraq and the U.S. Three Years Later"

Bernard-Henri Levy, author of American Vertigo, in his column in right-of-center weekly Le Point (03/24): "This is an opportunity for me to repeat what I have said before: that the war was absurd, mismanaged, aiming at the wrong target and achieving a tour de force: instead of reducing the number of Islamic terrorists and their power, doing the exact opposite. Having said this, anti-American paranoia is taking such proportions, with exaggerations of a 'satanic' America, that I must also reiterate certain truths. The oil scenario is not enough to explain the war. The truth is that Wolfowitz, Perle and the others launched a war which cannot be explained by such rationalization. As to America's 'imperialism,' history will in fact tell whether it was Jacksonism, Hamiltonism or Wilsonism which were operative in the launching of the war. What is certain is that the old concept of American imperialism setting up a bridgehead in Iraq does not fit with American tradition. Finally, the notion that princes of darkness without morals or principles engaged in the most immoral of all wars goes against logic. If morality were an issue, the decision to topple Saddam made this war sensible. It is only much later, when the political management of the conflict came up, when winning peace rather than winning the war turned into a disaster. America's mistake was not being political enough. All this may appear theoretical for many: but reality will hit when America reverts to its isolationism. and abandons Iraq to its fate and a civil war. This is when we will regret the time when America, despite its failings, still cared about the world." STAPLETON